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The Role of the Kandy Esala Perahera in Promoting Cultural Tourism in Sri Lanka: Balancing Intangible Cultural Heritage Preservation and Sustainable Tourism Development

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Research Article

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Abstract

The Kandy Esala Perahera is considered the most remarkable manifestation of living intangible cultural heritage in Sri Lanka and can be interpreted as an expression of the integration of religiosity, performing traditions, rituals and community practice. It is the most important celebration in the largest procession format of Sri Lanka, serving as a major attraction for cultural tourism as well as remaining a part of centuries-old traditions. This study investigates the role of the Kandy Esala Perahera for tourism in Sri Lanka focusing on the management of intangible cultural heritage with the sustainability development of the tourism process. A mixed-methods study design combining with both qualitative and quantitative techniques was employed for the research. Primary data were gathered using a structured questionnaire survey with 200 tourism stakeholders comprising of international and domestic tourists, owners of hotels and restaurants, owners of tour operators and hotels, local owners of business in Kandy, as well as locals in Kandy. Qualitative data were collected by field observation and open-ended survey questions, whereas secondary data were gathered from scholarly literature, government reports and heritage articles. The study finds that the Kandy Esala Perahera adds to a considerable amount in strengthening Sri Lankan cultural identity, consolidating Kandy as a heritage place, attracting domestic and international tourists, sustaining indigenous culture, mobilizing community participation and creating socio-economic benefits to local stakeholders; but there are other concerns in terms of escalating tourism pressure, commercialization, visitor flow management, environmental impact and cultural authenticity. Thus, sustainability of Kandy Esala Perahera needs a better management between heritage conservation and tourism in form of collaboration, governance, local participation, visitor management and proper use of new medias for the festival. This research aims to contribute to the scholarly discussion on intangible cultural heritage and cultural tourism by showing how living cultural performance is used for safeguarding as well as developing the destination tourism.

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage cultural memory and continuity Collective memory, cultural identity and continuity of human groups refer to the memories, identification systems, spiritual beliefs, knowledge, and creative skills possessed by a group from the historical continuum. The collective memory culture, identified culture and historical continuum is: people’s memories and thinking system for various contents and processes that make the groups’ identities and continue them throughout generations. The cultural heritages are any kind of cultural resources obtained from the ancestors and they will be valued and kept by a community into the coming generations (Sumanapala et al., 2024).

Cultural heritages have always been classified into two types based on their materials and imitations, namely as tangible assets and intangible assets (Nanayakkara, 2025). According to the UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, a group identifies its living culture with their representations and practices. These representations and practices also include the skillsets that living on the life in certain cultural context (UNESCO, 2003). For example, oral expressions and contents, performing traditions and live art performing forms and activities, live practice, and social

traditions and special celebrations; specific ecological wisdom and worldview on the natural and universal sphere as well as traditional handicraft (UNESCO, 2003). There exists an intimate interdependence between material culture and spiritual culture and certain heritages that acquire their importance not alone from buildings but the surrounding society and its social habits.

During the last decades protecting cultural intangible heritage has been a prominent issue around the globe. The living heritage practices enrich diversity, cohesion and identify to the communities and at the same time these are faced with growing risk by phenomena like: globalisation, urbanisation, change of life style, commercialisation and decline of the traditional ways of cultural transmission. Given the fact that Heritage is not renewable, and this fragile and complex issue faces a myriad of challenges if mishandled or when tourism is beyond the acceptable level, for the loss and degradation of physical monuments, cultural theft, Over-visitation without proper management can lead to physical degradation, dilution of the indigenous living traditions of their authentic essence (Csap, 2012).

Therefore, ensuring the cultural authenticity of the living heritage and its continuity poses a significant challenge for governments, heritage institutions and communities.

Against this backdrop, tourism has proved to be an important tool for heritage protection as well as socio-economic development. Tourism acts as a significant engine for economic growth, foreign exchange generation and poverty alleviation, particularly in the Global South Countries (Sumanapala et al., 2024). In Sri Lanka, tourism has become one of the top five exports that contribute well to its overall national development (Nanayakkara, 2025). Though it contributes much, growth in tourism activity simultaneously raises concerns about the continuity of cultural and natural heritage resources.

Sustainable tourism approaches have taken an increasingly important place in both academic studies and tourism policies. Sustainable tourism is defined as tourism that "takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities (Sivesan, 2019). Sustainable tourism should balance economic, socio-cultural and environmental development, by keeping in view maintaining ecological processes, preserving biological diversity and socio-cultural authenticity of communities (Ranasinghe, 2015; Sivesan, 2019).

Cultural tourism is currently one of the most rapidly developing sectors in the global tourism sector as cultural tourism gives visitors an opportunity to "learn, discover and experience the unique material, intellectual and emotional characteristics of a society" (Richards,2018). Modern travelers increasingly seek "authentic" and immersive experiences-"living like a local"-rather than commercialized mass-market products (Nanayakkara, 2025). A new concept in Sri Lankan tourism, the activity economy is driven by cultural activities and events (Gamage, 2022).

Even with the tremendous potential offered by the activity economy in diversifying tourism in Sri Lanka, it is still a tourism sector yet to be fully contextualised into a theoretical and marketing framework

(Gamage, 2022). Hence the traditional cultural festivals remain one of the significant platforms where tourists can experience authentic living heritage, while actively contributing to their economies.

The rich cultural Heritage Sri Lanka possesses is spread over a period of 2,000 years of religious, cultural and artistic endeavors. From among many of its cultural Festivals the Sri Kandy Esala Perahera, stands among its outstanding and highly appreciated expressions of living intangible heritage. The festival, held annually within the ancient city of Kandy, centers around the Sacred Temple of the Tooth Relic .it integrates a mixture of Buddhist ritual ceremonies, dances, drumming performances, decorated elephants, processions and various forms of art integrated with a medley of various folk artforms and traditions. Beyond its function as a purely ceremony the festival manifests Sri Lanka's history, religious belief, artistic mastery as well as collective identity.

The Kandy Esala Perahera has thus developed into one of Sri Lanka's major cultural tourism destinations and draws thousands of visitors annually, both Sri Lankans and international tourists. In terms of its tourism impacts, the Perahera provides strong contribution to destination branding, interpretation and visitors' experience, and generates a substantial amount of income and employment to accommodation sector, food and beverage services, transport services, tour operators, souvenir artisans, entertainers, and other related establishments. Also, more importantly, the Perahera plays a significant role for continued transmission of ritual lore and values associated with the tradition from older generations to youngers, supporting long-term preservation and sustainable use of this living heritage.

Notwithstanding these positive aspects, however, rapid growth of the festival tourism carries with it the associated risks of congestion management, increasing commoditisation, strain on heritage resources and challenges to preserve the authenticity and sanctity of the festival.

Despite the recognised importance of Kandy Esala Perahera as cultural tourism destination, academic inquiry into the phenomenon from the perspective of cultural tourism has been relatively sparse compared to the extensive scholarship on heritage tourism, destination marketing, historical significance and management of the festival. It is comparatively underexplored how the Perahera simultaneously serves the functions as a living heritage phenomenon, a resource for tourism, and a vehicle for community development and socio-economic well-being. It is therefore crucial to understand the nature of the relationship for formulating relevant policy and planning measures which reconcile the dual roles of tourism development and cultural heritagse safeguarding. The research seeks to investigate the role and impacts of Kandy Esala Perahera in promoting Cultural tourism in Sri Lanka, considering Intangible Cultural Heritage Preservation and Sustainable tourism development aspects.

This study aims to examine the role of the Kandy Esala Perahera in promoting cultural tourism in Sri Lanka while balancing the preservation of intangible cultural heritage with sustainable tourism development. Using the Kandy Esala Perahera as a case study, the research investigates its contribution to enhancing cultural tourism, safeguarding traditional rituals, performing arts and cultural practices, and supporting the socio-economic development of local communities. The study further examines the challenges associated with festival-based tourism, including issues of authenticity, commercialisation,

visitor management and heritage conservation, with the objective of identifying strategies that strengthen the long-term sustainability of the festival. In doing so, the research seeks to provide a basis for heritage-sensitive tourism planning and policy development that supports both the safeguarding of living cultural heritage and the sustainable growth of cultural tourism in Sri Lanka.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Kandy Esala Perahera in Sri Lanka

The Kandy Esala Perahera is one of Sri Lanka's foremost religious and cultural carnivals and a paramount of the nation's living intangible cultural heritage. It is considered the "grandest" amongst Buddhist festivals celebrated on the island, being the most magnificent live performance of Sri Lankan culture (Jayasinghe, 2019). Conducted annually in the city of Kandy during the lunar month of Esala (July-August), the Perahera centres on the veneration of the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic (Sri Dalada Maligawa), which preserves the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha, among the most holy Buddhist artefacts revered in Sri Lanka.

It mirrors a close link between religion, history, traditional Performing Arts, royal patronage and the spirit of the whole community. The Perahera's historical genesis has caused scholarly debate and contention; whilst the majority holds that it originated with the advent of the Sacred Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha, it also shows indications of the merging of indigenous forms with earlier Indian cultural practices and rituals (Jayasinghe, 2019). The modern form of the ceremony was stabilised in the Kandyan Kingdom when King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe united the Buddhist festival honouring the Holy Tooth Relic with annual festivals that honoured the four guardians – Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama and Pattini (Gamage, 2022).

The traditional purpose of the Esala Perahera is to implore the gods for rain, to ensure successful crop cultivation and the prosperity of the kingdom (Jayasinghe, 2019). Other than its religious objective, it has also served in history as a unique form of state ceremony designed to attest the political legitimacy, the unity and even the very identity of the nation. The sacred Tooth Relic was used in the days of the Kandyan Kingdom (1469–1815) to signify royal authority, and its processions annually re-enacted the connection between royalty, Buddhism, and its people. Even after 1815, with the subjugation of Kandyan Kingdom by British Government, its possession was reserved for Buddhist prelates and as such it continues to be a part of religious life that allows for persistence in new politico – social contexts and traditions.

The festival spans 10 days in July or August, and it is a flamboyant parade featuring "decorated" elephants, drummers, whip-crackers, fire-ball dancers, and classical Kandyan dancers (Herath & Liyanage, 2016). Several stages constitute the processions - Kumbal Perahera, Randoli Perahera and Day Perahera – all with different ritual meanings (Jayasinghe, 2019).

Kandyan dance traditions of Sri Lanka form an integral part of the Kandy Esala Perahera; Wes dance, Naiadi dance, Pantheru dance, Li Keli Dance, Raban Dance, Talam Dance, Savaran Dance, Chamara

Dance, and various percussion performances are woven in with other procession elements, showing the breadth of the island's performance traditions. Kasa and Ves dances, two important elements still maintained, rely most heavily on being practised within family circles and oral knowledge, passed from one generation to the next (Jayasinghe, 2019). Thus, it stands out as a living cultural complex. Another salient, though increasingly contested feature is the perpetuation, through specialised family practices and duties of performers in certain organised groups, of aspects of the old caste structure (Jayasinghe, 2019).

The cultural value of the Kandy Esala Perahera goes further than the ceremonial or religious ones. Indeed, this is among the best known of Sri Lanka’s attractions related to culture tourism, bringing tens of thousands of visitors, Sri Lanka residents and foreign nationals alike, to the Sacred City to witness Sri Lanka's 'living traditions' which includes rituals, performances, and cultural shows. Further linked with the Sacred City of Kandy as one of the country's UNESCO World Heritage site, the Perahera has given the Sacred City more renown within an international forum while solidifying Sri Lanka’s role as a country rich in cultural experiences. Tourism generated from the festival is substantial, creating jobs and supporting hotels, restaurants, transportation, tour agencies, food vendors, souvenir producers, artistes, performers and others who have developed enterprises that rely solely on the Perahera. The function, therefore, serves simultaneously the purposes of heritage promotion, destination development, and livelihood generation.

However, the popularity and global recognition of the Kandy Esala Perahera have made the management of the heritage associated with this tradition more complicated, while the demand by an ever-growing pool of visitors is at loggerheads with many of the traditional norms of the ceremony itself. Increasingly, environmental pressures associated with rising visitors and the commercializing of elements of the performance create challenges that threaten the authenticity of the rituals and respect for the traditions of the performing groups. The destruction, misuse, or decline of the intangible cultural heritage because of tourism can gradually lead to the undermining of its social and spiritual meaning, undermining this priceless heritage. A balance must, therefore, be struck to manage a delicate form of heritage within the developing global context.

Overall, the Kandy Esala Perahera represents a unique convergence of religion, history, traditional performing arts and cultural tourism. Its continued vitality depends upon the active participation of religious institutions, traditional performers, local communities and heritage managers in safeguarding its authenticity while responding to the opportunities and challenges created by contemporary tourism. As one of Sri Lanka's most celebrated living heritage festivals, the Kandy Esala Perahera provides an important case through which the relationship between intangible cultural heritage preservation and sustainable cultural tourism can be better understood.

3. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted using mixed methods to assess the contribution of Kandy Esala Perahera to the promotion of cultural tourism in Sri Lanka focusing particularly on the connection between the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and sustainable tourism development. By using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, it examined perceptions of stakeholders as well as the broader social, cultural and economic importance of the festival. The study was conducted in the city of Kandy in Sri Lanka; home of the Annual Esala Perahera. Kandy was chosen to participate because it is the major heritage tourism destination in the country, and its sacred Tooth Relic relic housed at the Temple of the Tooth, which forms the nexus of the cultural festival, ensures it will be the focus of all research about traditional performing arts and tourism.

Two hundred structured questionnaires were administered to key stakeholders, such as domestic and international tourists, hotel and restaurant owners, tour operators and agents, owners of retail businesses, performers and local community members. The chosen sample had direct experience of the Kandy Esala Perahera and the study used purposive sampling for data collection. Each question on the questionnaire was scored using a five-point Likert scale and included a few open-ended questions that focused on destination image, visitor experience, heritage preservation, community participation, economic benefits, and management for sustainability.

Field observations were carried out during the Kandy Esala Perahera festival as a supplementary method. This allowed observations of ritual activities, performers, visitors, business owners, stakeholders and tourism providers during the event. The observations helped in understanding how tourist activities are integrated with cultural performance, for example how cultural practices are packaged or promoted for tourists. Secondary sources used included peer-reviewed journals, books, academic papers presented at conferences, reports by government bodies and tourism publications, policy documents, and UNESCO publications that are related to cultural heritage, cultural tourism and sustainable tourism.

Data obtained quantitatively using questionnaire surveys were analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies, percentages, the mean and graphical displays were used in the study so as to present what patterns existed in stakeholder perceptions. The data obtained from open-ended questions was analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis as were themes based on the observations. Themes relate to heritage preservation, the promotion of tourism as well as to the income from tourism, community participation, authenticity, and commercialisation of cultural heritage.

Integrating the quantitative and qualitative data yielded results in greater depth and width about the contribution of the Kandy Esala Perahera to the country’s tourism. Ethical standards are upheld through the collection of data from willing participants whom have consented to take part and have been informed about the context and purpose of the data collection. Data will only be used for academic purposes and also the cultural and religious sanctity of the Kandy Esala Perahera will always be respected.

4. Result

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The sample comprised 200 respondents in order to investigate the concerns and opinions of principal stakeholder groups within Kandy Esala Perahera and cultural tourism. This multi-sector group ensured that we were able to acquire a cross-sectional view on the cultural, social, and economic impacts of the Kandy Esala Perahera festival. Of the various stakeholder groups as presented in Table 1.

Domestic tourists are the largest stakeholder group 20% whereas 17% are from the local community, 15% represent local businessmen, followed by international tourists 13% tour operators/ travel agents 13% hotel owners 12% and Restaurant Owners 10%.

This fairly balanced sampling would ensure findings were representative of stakeholder responses concerning tourism practice, heritage conservation, and local participation in the Kandy Esala Perahera.

Table 1
Distribution of respondents by stakeholder category

Respondent Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Domestic Tourist	40	20
International Tourist	26	13
Hotel Owner	24	12
Restaurant Owner	20	10
Tour Operator / Travel Agent	26	13
Local Business Owner	30	15
Local Community Member	34	17
Total	200	100

4.2 Stakeholders' Perceptions of Cultural Heritage Preservation

The first purpose of this research was to identify stakeholder opinion towards the contribution of the Kandy Esala Perahera to the sustainability of Sri Lanka's intangible heritage resources. The majority of respondents maintained an agree opinion in both questions under the objective.

Table 2 highlights that about 47% of respondents 'strongly agreed' and 46% of respondents 'agreed' with the statement 'Kandy Esala Perahera helps to preserve cultural heritage of Sri Lanka.' It could clearly be stated that out of every ten respondents, approximately nine view the event as a method to promote the living aspect of a culture. Only a negligible number of respondents disagreed with the statement. The

results in Table 2 show that 92% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the notion that the festival preserves traditional Kandyan dance, music and rituals, and similarly, 92% of the sample stakeholders agreed or strongly agreed that the event serves as an important symbol of Sri Lankan cultural identity. These indicate not only a religious festival, but also that the event is an integral cultural institution in supporting performing culture and traditions among the stakeholders too.

Table 2
Respondents' perceptions of cultural heritage preservation

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The Kandy Esala Perahera contributes to preserving Sri Lanka's cultural heritage.	47%	46%	4%	2%	1%
The festival preserves traditional Kandyan dance, music and rituals.	44%	48%	4%	3%	1%
The festival strengthens Sri Lanka's cultural identity.	42%	50%	5%	2%	1%

4.3 Festival Experience

Contribution of the Perahera to visitor experience-perception of stakeholders. The stakeholder perceptions toward the contribution of the Perahera to visitor experience as it relates to the quality of information are presented in Table 3 above. The majority of respondents regarded it as offering authentic cultural experiences that would create favorable memories and impressions for domestic and local visitors as well as foreigners. 90% agree or strongly agree that the Perahera attracts locals, compared to 87% who agree that the Perahera attracts foreigners. 91% are of the opinion that the Perahera offers an authentic cultural experience, emphasising the role played by sacred religious and devotional aspects as well as the Perahera performance itself in creating such an impression. 88% said that tourists will most likely return to Kandy because of the Perahera.

Table 3
Respondents' perceptions of the festival experience

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The Kandy Esala Perahera attracts domestic tourists.	36%	54%	5%	3%	2%
The festival attracts international tourists.	34%	53%	7%	4%	2%
The festival provides authentic cultural experiences.	46%	45%	5%	3%	1%
Tourists are likely to revisit Kandy because of the festival.	39%	49%	7%	3%	2%

4.4 Destination Image

The results suggested that Kandy Esala Perahera was considered a significant driver of destination branding and tourism competitiveness by respondents. According to Table 4, more than 90% of respondents agreed that it creates a positive image in terms of tourism in Kandy and enhances the image and the reputation of Sri Lanka as a global tourist destination, and they also believed that it enhances the competitiveness of the cultural destination, especially of one of the most important cultural heritage destinations in Sri Lanka.

Table 4
Respondents' perceptions of destination image

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The festival enhances Kandy's tourism image.	43%	49%	4%	3%	1%
The festival improves Sri Lanka's international tourism image.	40%	50%	6%	3%	1%
The festival increases Kandy's competitiveness.	41%	49%	6%	3%	1%

4.5 Community Participation

The survey on stakeholders' perceptions was conducted, considering the role of community participation in the Kandy Esala Perahera Festival. It was expected that "Stakeholders believe active local community participation is indispensable for maintaining the cultural integrity of the Kandy Esala Perahera Festival and for intensifying the cultural experience for tourists." This is presented in Table 5 and reveals high percentage responses to items under the perceived role of community participation.

A majority of the stakeholders 92% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "Local communities actively participate in the organisation and implementation of the Kandy Esala Perahera." About 91% also said that "Community participation enhances visitors' cultural experiences," while 91% agreed that "The festival strengthens community pride and cultural identity."

Table 5
Respondents' perceptions of community participation

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Local communities actively participate in the organisation and implementation of the Kandy Esala Perahera.	45%	47%	5%	2%	1%
Community participation enhances visitors' cultural experiences.	42%	49%	6%	2%	1%
The festival strengthens community pride and cultural identity.	44%	47%	5%	3%	1%

4.6 Economic Benefits

This study was on ‘Conceiving how the stakeholders perceive economic benefits stemming from the Kandy Esala Perahera and tourism '. The study found that locals are of the view that the Kandy Esala Perahera is an event of great concern in bringing economic benefits to the area due to the tourism-related activities associated with it. From Table 6, 91% of respondents replied with agree or strongly agree that the festival brings benefits to the local business income in the area. Also, 91% of respondents replied that the festival creates employment.91% agreed that the festival is an event of great concern in the development of the local economy of Kandy Esala Perahera.

Table 6
Respondents' perceptions of economic benefits

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The festival increases local business income.	41%	50%	5%	3%	1%
The festival creates employment opportunities.	39%	52%	5%	3%	1%
The festival contributes to the local economy.	43%	48%	5%	3%	1%

4.7 Government Support and Sustainable Tourism

Another aspect questioned in this survey is the stakeholders' perception of the government and sustainable management of the Kandy Esala Perahera. Overall, they agreed and strongly agreed that there is a need to reinforce institutional participation and implement a sustainable management system for Kandy Esala Perahera, as shown in Table 7. They strongly agree and agree that Government’s support is vital for the success of the festival 92%, that digital marketing should be amplified to promote the Kandy Esala Perahera 93% and that, for the purpose of maintaining its cultural heritage value, a sound management program in tourism is a prerequisite 93%. Only 81% of respondents are of the opinion that existing tourism infrastructure has been conducive in relation to the current festival event.

Table 7
Respondents' perceptions of government support and sustainable tourism

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Government support is essential.	44%	48%	4%	3%	1%
Tourism infrastructure supports the festival.	35%	46%	10%	6%	3%
Digital marketing should be expanded.	48%	45%	4%	2%	1%
Sustainable management is necessary.	49%	44%	4%	2%	1%

In conclusion, the exploratory results provide evidence that stakeholders consider the Kandy Esala Perahera an important element of a living cultural heritage festival, which facilitates cultural preservation, strengthens the image of the destination, enhances the experience of visitors and participates in community development, community involvement and local economic development. At the same time, respondents highlight the need for sustained government involvement, an enhanced tourism infrastructure, digital promotion and a sustainable managing framework for the perpetuation and safeguarding of the Kandy Esala Perahera in the future.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide evidence of the value of the Kandy Esala Perahera to cultural tourism in Sri Lanka and to the continuation and intergenerational transmission of intangible cultural heritage. Most stakeholders were unanimous in perceiving the festival as an important cultural resource, beyond its spiritual significance, through the preservation of traditional knowledge, performance, ritual, and community identity. The high consensus regarding the event's cultural significance indicates that the Perahera is still living in heritage practice, through which traditions are perpetuated from older to younger generations.

Secondly, the results also show that the Kandy Esala Perahera contributes significantly to the development of cultural tourism by fostering Kandy's image as a major cultural heritage destination. It was argued by respondents that the festival is attracting both local and foreign tourists through the blend of religious practices, performances and the traditional history. Authenticity of the experiences produced by the processional, tradititional Kandyan dancing, traditional music and community participation are attractive and keep them coming for its cultural attraction. This shows that living cultural tradition can be an important resource to developing sustainable cultural tourism.

Thirdly, Perahera was perceived as contributing to the safeguarding of intangible culture heritage. Respondents argued that the festival provides a way of safeguarding traditional practices of dancing, performing and singing and cultural values. Active participation of the traditional performers, religious

institutions and local communities help to transmit the tradition and knowledge to the new generation and raise awareness about the living heritages of Sri Lanka. It also shows that community participation is instrumental in the practice of an authentic live heritage. Local community participation helps in practicing the tradition and also enrich their experiences through direct involvement with its practice.

The results also found that the Kandy Esala Perahera provides benefits from local tourism, including socio-economic benefits. Respondents agreed that tourism brings increased demand for hotels, restaurants, transport, handicrafts, and other tourism-related businesses, and jobs to local people and to cultural performers. This indicates that tangible cultural heritage can be a cultural resource as well as a tourism resource. It also suggests, however, that benefits from tourism need to be more evenly distributed to local people, who play a key role in maintaining tradition.

Despite the benefits, the research also identifies challenges to the long-term viability of the festival. Concern was raised about rising visitor numbers, commercialization of the festival, traffic congestion and environmental concerns. These challenges can undermine the spiritual and cultural authenticity of the Perahera if not properly managed, which supports development of tourism as a sustainable resource. So responsible development strategies should create balance between tourism development and preservation of cultural and religious significance of the festival.

Respondents believe in stakeholder engagement and digital development, with support for closer cooperation among government agencies, religious leaders, tourism organizations, cultural performers and local people to strengthen administration of the festival. Also the utility of digital documentation, on-line promotion and social networks for increasing international visibility and promoting heritage education was recognized. Nevertheless, traditional value should accompany, not be displaced by digital experiences.

6. Conclusion

In essence, this research investigated how the Kandy Esala Perahera has the potential to advance cultural tourism in Sri Lanka, while also discussing the significance of conserving and using tangible cultural heritage to support sustainable tourism initiatives. This study argues that the Perahera festival not only represents Sri Lanka's leading religious and cultural celebration, it can also act as a sustainable tourism resource for heritage conservation, destination appeal, and Socio-economic improvement of host localities. Being a live cultural event, intangible culture, ancient ritual practices, performing skills, common knowledge and cultural practices associated with community values continue to grow, thereby fortifying Sri Lankan cultural identity.

In this study, results show that in this cultural event, both local Sri Lankan travellers and foreign travellers flock to discover unique experiences of cultural events in this celebrated tradition. These aspects of tradition, religious rituals, together with social involvement, ensure distinctiveness, placing Kandy among premier cultural destinations in South Asia. Furthermore, economic benefits and incomes are generated for people, including business organisations that cater to Tourism purposes, folk entertainers, traditional

artists, and common residents, thereby providing opportunities for the local region as a result of living cultural heritage; these illustrate the role of living culture for local sustainable development.

Nevertheless, these achievements would be jeopardised if suitable practices aren't implemented to ensure sustainability in future. Growing amount of vacationers, commercialisation, environmental impact and authenticity issues regarding to cultural as well as religious aspect have to be taken into account so as to carry-on heritage sensitive way oftourism; consequently, Sri Lanka's traditional Esala Perahera must concentrate to be protecting their cultural and the religious significance where as to allocate these particular added values properly with all of the stakeholders involved in protect of this event. The conclusion stresses the necessity of inclusive policymaking for all living cultural events. Strong and co-operation link among governments, religion bodies, commercial sectors, local representatives and cultural facilitators are vital for the best-match of the culture and tourism sector to promote and support this event for better sustainability in long term, furthermore, appropriate technologies are very useful in the processes of culture recording, interpreting cultural values and public relation toward more people both in Sri Lankan and the international public at Large in terms to improve and provide better outcome to this celebration.

This research adds to the emerging literature on cultural tourism and intangible cultural heritage and confirms the role of a living cultural festival as a heritage practice, tourist attraction and sustainable socio-economic development driver. It presents an operational framework for heritage managers, tour operators and tourism policy-makers for the development of respectful cultural tourism strategies for managing genuine expressions of heritage which are simultaneously valued by both the local community and tourists. A vital lesson learned here is the crucial relevance of applying heritage preservation practice principles within tourism management systems to ensure that a living heritage remains preserved under growing pressures exerted by tourist numbers.

Limitations of the research are of course not beyond discussion.

The scope of this research is focused on an individual case study (Kandy Esala Perahera), while also restricting analysis to a group of stakeholders and a specific geographical area; thus, the conclusions will probably not apply elsewhere, but the research can suggest possibilities in other cultural festivals or other forms of heritage management. More research could be done for similar cases in Sri Lanka and abroad (comparative analyses), or more research is needed about what kind of experience the visitor really would gain during those cultural heritage experiences, including visitor analyses based on longitudinal data, and exploring uses of ICTs - digitalised heritage - including virtual heritage applications and AI, for immersive storytelling on the intangible heritage. In short: a living cultural festival can be both kept authentic and used to create socio-economic and cultural assets – providing effective leadership and a sound community base for its practice. A careful balancing and management of heritage – visitor and community – interests is absolutely required if the Kandy Esala Perahera is to be protected for the next generations – both as a genuine heritage experience and an important asset of cultural tourism on which the economic development of Sri Lanka is dependent.

Declarations

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